

Aches, pains and strains

from manual handling,
DSE and RSI

a UNISON guide for members



Aches, pains, and strains are common; especially after some physical work or exercise. Asking our bodies to do too much – or repeated aches, pains, and strains – can cause serious, long-term, or even permanent injury or disability.

Musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) include back pain or injury, and repetitive strain injury (RSI). These affect the bones, joints, muscles, nerves, or other soft tissues of our bodies. MSDs may cause pain or discomfort, and limit what we are able to do.

The human body is designed to move, but also needs to rest, so repeated movements, keeping still for too long, or asking it to do too much can wear it out.

Aches, pains, and strains at work are common; but that doesn't mean that we should put up with them. Just like other work-related hazards, employers must prevent or minimise the chance of their employees being hurt.

Back pain/injury

Most of us will suffer back pain during our life, but back injuries must be avoided because they may become long-term, recurring, or permanent.

Lower back pain is common, and can be extremely painful, difficult to cope with, and can limit our activities. In the past, bed rest was recommended, but it is now generally accepted that it is better to keep as normally active as possible.

Repetitive strain injury (RSI)

RSI covers a wide range of injuries (see below) usually affecting the fingers, hands, wrists, elbows, arms, or shoulders; but the neck, back, hips, knees, ankles, feet and toes can also suffer. These types of injuries have other names including work related upper limb disorders (WRULDs).

They can cause:

- pain, tenderness, swelling, inflammation, or a feeling of heaviness;
- a tingling or burning, cold or loss of sensation, numbness, or the fingers to turn white;
- swellings or ganglions (cyst-like swellings);
- restricted movement of the joints, stiffness, muscle weakness or spasms, or the loss of strength and grip in the hand; or
- tiredness and extreme fatigue.

There are many types of RSI, but for some (diffused RSI) it can be difficult to say exactly where the pain is coming from. Others (localised RSI) include:

- Bursitis ('beat knee', 'housemaid's knee', 'beat elbow', or 'frozen shoulder')
- Carpal tunnel syndrome (which includes tingling, pain, and numbness in the thumb and fingers)
- Dupuytren's contracture (which causes one or more of the fingers or thumbs to bend into the palm)
- Epicondylitis ('tennis' or 'golfer's elbow', but it can occur elsewhere)
- Focal dystonia of the hand or forearm (which may involve muscle spasms and contractions)
- Ganglions (cysts at a joint or in a sheath around a tendon)
- Osteoarthritis (damage to a joint causing scarring and excess bone growth, stiffness and pain)
- Raynaud's phenomenon (Vibration White Finger/Hand Arm Vibration Syndrome or HAVS)
- Rotator cuff syndrome/Tension neck or shoulder (inflamed tendons or muscles)
- Tendonitis or Tenosynovitis (inflamed tendons or tendon sheath including 'trigger finger')
- Thoracic outlet syndrome (compression of the nerves or blood vessels between the neck and the armpit causing numbness, weakness, or tingling in the arm and fingers, and HAVS (see above).

Are you at risk of harm?

Many of UNISON's RSI cases involve keyboard users, but nearly all work carries a risk if there are continued or repeated movements. Cooks, cleaners, carers, drivers, road and general maintenance workers, healthcare workers, carpenters, gardeners, and machine operators are also at risk.

Women are more likely to suffer from back pain but take fewer days off. While 'traditional' men's jobs may require lifting individually heavier objects, some 'typical' women's jobs can see them lifting more often, so that the total amount they lift is far greater. Jobs in health, social care, caretaking and portering have above average back injuries; but others including admin workers, drivers, and those working in parks are also at risk.

If you are suffering aches, pains, and strains, then you may be at risk and harm may be occurring. Even if not suffering now, you may still be at risk. In either case, see if you can recognise any of the 'risk factors' listed below, in your job, and then see the 'Next steps' section for further advice.

Potential causes (risk factors) Does your job require:	You may at be risk of:	
	Back pain or back injury	RSI
continued or repeated movement	•	•
bending or twisting	•	•
hammering and pounding (including typing)		•
pushing or pulling	•	•
stretching or reaching	•	•
lifting or carrying	•	•
working too fast	•	•
a lack of variety in tasks or a lack of breaks	•	•
long hours, overuse (excessive use) or excessive workloads	•	•
awkward, fixed or uncomfortable positions (including driving, standing or sitting) for too long	•	•
awkward or fixed grip		•
continued or repeated application of pressure, squeezing, or having to use too much force by hand or foot		•
working with vibrating or badly designed tools and equipment	•	•
poor working environments (including those that are cold, uncomfortable or stressful)	•	•

What should your employer do?

By law, employers must prevent or minimise the chance of harm to you and other employees. This is done by a process called risk assessment. So, if a task or way of working may cause RSI or back pain or injury, then it should be avoided, changed, or done in a different and safer way.

If you want to know more about risk assessment, UNISON also has a pamphlet for members – details are at the end of this leaflet. UNISON also has more detailed guidance for safety reps.

If you usually work most of the time with computers or other display screen equipment – then your employer must:

- either allow you rest breaks or give you different tasks to do,
- ensure that your workstation meets safe minimum standards, and
- provide you with free eye and eyesight tests and possibly glasses.

For further information, see the UNISON guide *Are you sitting comfortably? UNISON's Display Screen Equipment (DSE) Guide for members and staff*.

All work equipment, machinery and tools, including hoists, etc – must be:

- safe,
- suitable, and
- only used for the work they are designed for.

So larger wheels might be necessary if travelling over soft carpet, DIY tools might not be adequate nor safe for regular work use, and you shouldn't have to suffer vibration or strain injuries.

All workplaces and workstations

- must be suitable for the workers using them and the work being done,
- so that it can be carried out with enough space, safely and comfortably,
- without awkward postures, and
- with as few as possible movements such as bending or stretching.

If possible to do the work sitting down, you should be given a suitable seat, and a footrest if necessary.

Manual handling

- Includes lifting, lowering, pushing, pulling, carrying or moving something by hand or by using bodily force.
- If there is a risk of harm, employers must avoid the need for you to manually handle so far as possible.
- This might be done by ordering heavy objects in smaller units or bundles, using a machine to do the lifting, or providing roller conveyers or height adjustable surfaces, etc.
- Where manual handling cannot be avoided, your employer should provide equipment such as a trolley or hoist which make it safer to move an object. However, they must also give you suitable information, instruction, supervision, and training on how to use this equipment so that it is used safely, because some bodily force is still required. For example, how to safely push or pull a trolley or position or steady a load in a hoist.

The lifting of patients

- Staff should never be asked to lift a person on their own, or support someone's full body weight.

- If a patient needs help moving, it may be safer to use a hoist or specialist “pat” slide.
- If these won't work in the circumstance, then two or more employees trained in how to lift more safely might be appropriate.

Lifting people poses specific challenges. As well as the weight of the patient, their condition and any behavioural challenges must also be considered.

Next steps: still at risk or experiencing a problem?

It is especially important to watch out for aches and pains that don't go away, are frequent, keep coming back, or that may go away when you are not at work but return when you are. RSI if untreated gets worse over time so it is important that changes are made at work and any treatment begun as soon as possible. Otherwise it may also take longer, possibly years to fully recover; or if too much damage occurs, full recovery may no longer be possible.

Other measures such as painkillers, arm-splints, physiotherapy, ultrasound or surgery will not cure the condition if you are forced to continue the work that caused the problem in the first place.

If you are experiencing back pain or an injury, or RSI related to work, you should speak with these three people.

1 Your UNISON safety rep

They will be able to advise you, carry out safety inspections and investigations, seek further advice, and/or may represent you to your employer and raise your concerns if you wish. This could prevent further harm to you by making your work safer and healthier. They can also check whether other members or workers are experiencing similar problems, plus support you in other ways.

This might include getting your employer to make reasonable adjustments (as may be required by law) if you have a certain disability. These adjustments may include: reduced or altered hours without financial loss, a change of duties, adaptations to the workplace, or working from home. Your employer must not discriminate against you because of a disability, which may include action against a disabled worker for taking disability-related sickness absence.

Your rep may also support and get you further advice about any possible claim for compensation from your employer or the Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit (IIDB) scheme. The scheme covers certain illnesses and disabilities including some RSIs if linked to a specific job. UNISON lawyers will be able to advise if you have a legal claim for any injury or ill health.

2 Your doctor

Report any aches, pains, strains or other symptoms. Explain why you believe they are linked to work and follow their advice. Your GP may issue a fit note, which has replaced the traditional sick note. Within this, they may suggest helpful changes including: a phased return to work, altered hours, amended duties, or alterations to the workplace, etc.

3 Your employer

Report your symptoms and any concerns to them as early as possible. Otherwise they may be less likely to prevent the harm from occurring, and if you ever need to claim compensation, may try to argue that it wasn't their fault. If you prefer, your safety rep can help you notify your employer, which might be best done in writing or in electronic form so that you have proof. Again, explain why you believe it is linked to work, keep a copy, and also record your symptoms in the accident book.

Further advice

Further advice, support, and possibly even funding are available from Access to Work, a specialist service delivered by Jobcentre Plus. If you have a health condition or a disability that affects your ability to work, it may help with: aids and adaptations to equipment at work, fares to work if public transport is not suitable, or with covering the cost of a support worker or job coach. You as the employee must contact Access to Work, but it's probably best to inform your employer as well.

For further information, see UNISON's guides including, *Disability and Health and Safety*, and *Making sickness absence policies work better for us*; and the 'other' websites listed below.

UNISON

UNISON online catalogue – unison.org.uk/catalogue

Aches, Pains and Strains (stock no. 3827) – guide for safety reps.

Are you sitting comfortably? (stock no. 2692) – DSE guide for members and staff.

Disability and health and safety (stock no. 3068) – guide for safety reps.

Are you at risk? (stock no. 2720) – booklet for members explaining risk assessment.

Other

The Citizens Advice Bureau on disability and the Equality Act – citizensadvice.org.uk

Government advice on Access to Work – gov.uk/access-to-work

Government advice on the Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit.
Search: IIDB

RSI Action – the national charity for further support and information. From their website at www.RSIAction.org.uk, you will be able to find information on local RSI support groups.

UNISON – where health and safety matters



Three simple ways to
join UNISON today:



Join online at
joinunison.org



Call us on
0800 171 2193



Ask your UNISON rep
for an application form